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A cowboy named Elton Howard imitated ewes bleating and calves bawling better than any of the other hands at the old ranch. He had plenty of time to practice as he worked for the family from 1946 up into the 1980s. The pastures he looked after are a slick ledge rock country, covered with juniper cedars entwined in oak shinnery and prickly pear cactus. Such inhospitable terrain for man and his horse requires all the tricks of the trade. Calling runaway lambs back to their mothers, or making a cow hunt for her baby, were just some of Elton's specialties. On many occasions, he gathered large scopes of country alone.

Modern-day livestock, however, work differently than the woolies and hollow horns of those days. This generation of sack-trained animals expects to be fed very time they are untracked. Bonded to feed wagons, the helpless old sisters resist being driven without range cubes strewn along the road to the corral.

Not long ago, a South Texas cowboy explained the reason one third of the strays in last fall's floods in his country were unbranded (23,000 head drowned). He claimed the mavericks among these thousands of head of strayed cattle were the ones who refused to follow a pickup to the pens, thus were left without a hot iron or a vaccinating needle ever touching their hides.

Don't misunderstand; the cow jungle has always been hard to gather. In other times, the likes of such expert wild cow hunters as David Leiberman and Ed Cassain roped

an the trunks of an oak tree. But stories today aren't about the Daves and Eds or the Eltons. All over the shortgrass country and the cow jungle, the whirl of helicopter propellers and the grind of four-wheeler gears mark the roundup scenes.

Woe be it to old fashioned outfits buying cattle never driven on horseback. The other morning, I had a small dose of intermingling the machine age and the horse age. Three of

us set out to gather three sections of mesquite thickets sparse enough in a few parts to ride through in a trot without being dragged off by a limb. In one of those clear spots, I rode up on a young bull we bought last winter. He'd only been in our pens at calf marking. Upon seeing my horse, he jumped up and bellowed the bawl cattle do from a hot dose of antibiotic.

He pawed the ground and snuffed in his own dust. I took down my rope. The rope had been coiled so long from disuse it flew apart the way the starter spring on a gasoline engine comes free. The bull turned his head from one direction to the other, rumbling a bellow he used to warn bulls across fences how fierce he was.

The cows arose and stood motionless; calves stretched and expressed inexperience by moving toward the mothers. The bull threw his head down and swung his body aligned in my direction. I hit my rope against my chaps. I warned him he'd better mind his manners, or he'd be given a free ride on the end of my rope to the pens, smoking from the hair burning off his black hide against mother earth. (No doubt this bull was stupid, but not dumb enough to believe a graybeard sitting in a saddle with a nylon rope flared out in his lap was going to be able to pick up his heels.)

Perhaps the exertion caused me to clear my throat. Presto, the bull wheeled and the cows responded by throwing up their tails and striking a run toward the windmill. He hit a trot and followed right in behind them.

Once the rest of the cattle were gathered, every time the bull looked back, I cleared my throat. I must have updated one of Elton's tricks by accidentally imitating a four-wheeler changing gears, or maybe reproducing the sound of a U-joint hitting the housing. The gentle cows' spooking stems from the unfenced road going through the pasture. Oil transports speed at breakneck speeds, cattle or no cattle in the road. Several times, we witnessed the drivers gearing down to allow livestock time to escape.

Scores of high school graduates are interviewed every spring without a one wanting to be a cowboy. Summer help, once taken for granted, no longer exists to my knowledge. On the odd days I help round up, I forget the old days. The clock, the weather, and the lunch pail become too important to hold a history class.